

Idaho Panhandle Avalanche Center
Avalanche Advisory

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This is Kevin Davis with the Idaho Panhandle Avalanche Center. Today is December 11, 2009. This marks the beginning of our regularly scheduled advisories for the 2009/10 winter season. This avalanche advisory will be valid for Friday, December 11, with an outlook for Saturday and Sunday. As we begin to accumulate snow and your adventures take you further into the backcountry send us your pit data, avalanche observations, or pictures. Good information goes a long way. Thanks to those that have submitted, Colby Neumann from Spokane NWS, Jesse Salisbury of Schweitzer Ski Patrol, and Dave Alley of Silver Mountain Ski Patrol.

Due to our still limited coverage of snowpack we are issuing one advisory for the entire forecast region. **Avalanche conditions for the Panhandle Avalanche Center forecast region are rated as MODERATE on northerly and westerly aspects greater than 35 degrees above 5,000 feet.** Natural avalanches are unlikely, *human triggered* avalanches are **possible**. **Avalanche conditions are rated as LOW on slopes less than 35 degrees above 5,000 feet.** Natural avalanches are very unlikely, *human triggered* avalanches are unlikely.

Why is there any avalanche danger when we have so little snowpack, you ask? Recall several important weather events. Firstly, we plunged into a deep and persistent cold spell with 3-4 feet of snow in the mountains. This weakened the snow structure in the pack and created quite a crop of surface hoar on top. Then we had strong winds blowing from the N/NE that redistributed snow from the easterly aspects to the westerly aspects. The most likely places to trigger an avalanche right now are on steep westerly, NW-SW, aspects where a very firm windslab has been deposited over a weak layer of surface hoar. Where the windslab is thick it will support your weight, even on a sled, but the thickness is highly variable across the slope and you will break through in places. Be cautious in areas where the windslab is isolated and thinner on the margins, thus floating like broken pack ice, and more easily set in motion. Dave found weak layers at the ground, about mid-pack at a decomposing ice crust, and near the surface. Last weekend Colby found a similar layering of weak snow in about 3 feet of snow in the St. Regis Basin at about 5,000 feet. We were out with Jesse on Schweitzer and had easy shears below the surface windslab and a dirty shear, although easy, at the ground. The culprit, faceted (sugary) snow and surface hoar.

The outlook for Saturday and Sunday is calling for snow. The National Weather Service has issued a Winter Storm Watch for south eastern Washington, the north central Idaho panhandle, and the Montana border. The southern portion of our forecast region is expected to experience the greatest snowfall amounts. A Pacific low pressure system will

converge with cold Canadian air and the predominant flow will be westerly, although local winds will be moderate and range from south to west. 8-14 inches in the mountains and 4-6 inches of snowfall in the valleys is anticipated, and this will occur generally south of I-90. What will this predicted weather do to the avalanche conditions? The hard surface snow will facilitate easy redistribution of new snowfall in moderate winds. Denser windslabs of newly blown snow over the existing windslab will be sensitive on steeper slopes. Avalanche conditions will remain moderate on windloaded aspects steeper than 35 degrees, although the windloaded aspects may change. Check the bond of new snow to existing surface snow in steep terrain especially where sheltered and snow is piling up deeper. Avalanches that trigger in upper layers could propagate to deeper layers or even slide to the ground.

On Thursday of next week Specialty Recreation on Kathleen in CDA will host an avalanche awareness class, 12/17/09. There will be free hotdogs at 6:00 pm and an avalanche presentation from 7:00 to 8:00 pm. Stop by see the new gear and get some knowledge to use it safely this winter!

The State of Idaho Parks and Recreation Department in cooperation with the IPNF-AC, is conducting (**Free**) avalanche workshops for snowmobilers this winter in Coeur d' Alene on January 8 and 9, Sandpoint February 12-13, and in Priest Lake March 5-6. For more information go to the Idaho Parks and Recreation Department website at www.parksandrecreation.idaho.gov, or call Marc Hildesheim, North Region Trails Specialist, at (208) 769-1511.

The Panhandle Avalanche Center in Sandpoint and Sandpoint Parks and Recreation is sponsoring free avalanche workshops for all snowgoers 12/9/09. "Decision Making in the Backcountry" workshops will be offered 1/6/10 and 2/10/10. These are offered at the old Federal Building in Sandpoint and are **Free to the public**. For class schedules in the Silver Valley contact Dan Frigard at 752-5130. In Avery contact Ed Odegard at 245-6209.

If you have a group or club that is interested in more education on avalanche safety we will be available for free avalanche awareness classes beginning in December, so feel free to give us a call. As usual we would appreciate hearing from anyone who happens to observe any recent avalanche activity while out in the backcountry or just wants to let us know what is going on in their area. You can reach Kevin Davis in Sandpoint by calling (208) 265-6686 and Ed Odegard in Avery by calling (208) 245-6209.